

VZCZCXRO8867
PP RUEHDIR
DE RUEHKB #0094/01 0351213
ZNY CCCCC ZZH
P 041213Z FEB 08
FM AMEMBASSY BAKU
TO RUEHC/SECSTATE WASHDC PRIORITY 4698
INFO RUCNCIS/CIS COLLECTIVE PRIORITY
RUEHAK/AMEMBASSY ANKARA PRIORITY 2615
RUEHDIR/IRAN RPO DUBAI PRIORITY
RUEAIIA/CIA WASHINGTON DC PRIORITY
RHMFISS/CDR USEUCOM VAHINGEN GE PRIORITY
RUEKJCS/SECDEF WASHDC PRIORITY

C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 BAKU 000094

SIPDIS

SIPDIS

FOR EUR/CARC

E.O. 12958: DECL: 02/04/2018

TAGS: [PREL](#) [PGOV](#) [PHUM](#) [KISL](#) [KPAO](#) [KIRF](#) [IR](#) [AJ](#)

SUBJECT: PROFILE OF A POPULAR AZERBAIJANI SHIA CLERIC

Classified By: Ambassador Anne E. Derse for reasons 1.4 (b) and (d).

¶1. (C) Summary: Many young and devout Azerbaijani Shias have identified Haji Shahin Hasanov, the imam at Baku's Dadash mosque, as a well respected Shia cleric. A soft-spoken, intelligent imam with a history degree, Hasanov says there is a Shia renaissance occurring in Azerbaijan, which parallels the growth of Shiism in the broader Muslim world. Hasanov said he hopes for the development of indigenous Shia voices in Azerbaijan, but said the GOAJ needs to open up the necessary political space for Azerbaijani Muslims to develop their own authentic religious traditions and institutions. Hasanov said that pockets of radicalism exist among Azerbaijan's Shia and Sunni communities, but the GOAJ and the press widely exaggerate the threat. End Summary.

¶2. (C) This cable is intended as the first of a broader series profiling Azerbaijani clerics. The Embassy is reaching out to respected Azerbaijani clerics as part of a broader Islamic outreach effort. This outreach aims to understand the diverse views of Azerbaijan's Muslims.

¶3. (C) Young, practicing Shia believers in Baku frequently identify Haji Hasanov as a respected, learned cleric. Haji Hasanov is the head imam at the Dadash Mosque in Baku, s Yasamal neighborhood. (Hasanov told us the mosque was registered in 1990, but he is in the process of re-registering the mosque with the Caucasus Muslim Board. Hasanov is upbeat that the mosque will be re-registered.) Hasanov told us approximately 2,000 people attend Friday prayers at the mosque and several local contacts told us this is a popular mosque. Hasanov's formal education is secular in nature; he studied history at Baku State University. Hasanov has not studied in Iran, unlike some other clerics and devout Shias believers. Hasanov is a soft-spoken, intelligent imam in his late 30s. Hasanov is comfortable sharing his views on a range of topics outside of theology. In addition to his clerical duties, he heads an NGO that focuses in part on promoting religious dialogue. The NGO also publishes a newspaper with some religious content, although the subscriber base is probably very limited.

Azerbaijani Shiism

¶4. (C) Hasanov said there is a Shia "renaissance" in Azerbaijan, paralleling the growth of Shiism in the broader Muslim world. Hasanov said he hopes for the development of authentic, indigenous Shia voices and institutions in Azerbaijan, which are not subservient to the interests of Iran or other states. He said Azerbaijan lacks a developed

mujtahid or ayatollah system like Iran or Iraq, primarily because of the dearth of Islamic knowledge in Azerbaijan. (NOTE: Mujtahid is a reference to the Islamic concept of a learned Muslim scholar who is entitled to make decisions regarding Islamic jurisprudence matters.) Hasanov said he hopes a mujtahid system will gradually grow in Azerbaijan if more qualified educational institutions are allowed to develop. Hasanov believes the government is to blame, in part, for the limited educational opportunities for Azerbaijani Muslims.

15. (C) Relative to the broader Muslim community, Hasanov said Shia believers place a special emphasis on political and social activism. Asked how he encourages fellow believers in this area, Hasanov said he tells Muslims about Islam's emphasis on a just and fair ruler and for all people to be treated fairly. Hasanov did not specifically criticize the Aliyev government; he stated this in a very non-specific fashion. Hasanov emphasized the importance of ijtihad for all Muslim believers, arguing that Islam needs to be continually adjusting itself to modernity. (NOTE: Ijtihad is a reference to striving or reforming within the Islamic community. The term is often used in the context of discussions on Islam's compatibility with modernity.)

Radicalism Exists, but Threat is Overblown

16. (C) Hasanov said there are pockets of radical Islam in Azerbaijan -- among Sunni and Shia communities -- but the GOAJ and the press significantly exaggerate the nature of the threat. Hasanov said "political interests" use the press to inflate the threat posed by radical Islam. Hasanov cited the

BAKU 00000094 002 OF 002

occasionally heard claim that Wahhabis are paying Azerbaijanis to go to Qom, Iran as an example of the government's and the general public's basic ignorance about Islam and predisposition to confuse piety with radicalism. (Comment: In general, Wahhabi adherents regard Shia believers as heretics; Wahhabis would be opposed to sending Muslims to study in Qom.)

17. (C) Speaking about Iranian attempts to influence the texture of Islam in Azerbaijan, Hasanov said Iran has some influence, but the government and the general public significantly exaggerate the threat. Hasanov said Haji Ilgar Ibrahimoglu and himself are the most popular Shia clerics in Baku and any coherent, large-scale Iranian attempt to export radical Islam would certainly have to pass through their mosques. Because of Iran's proximity and well-developed theological institutions, it is natural for some devout Azerbaijani Shias to look partially to Iran for religious guidance, according to Hasanov. He explained that he and some other Azerbaijani Shias selectively use Iranian theological writings and that it is a mistake to assume that all Iranian theological works are necessarily radical. (COMMENT: Prior reporting suggests Ibrahimoglu has had relations with Iran, but we cannot confirm or deny the precise nature of these links.)

18. (C) Asked about tensions between Azerbaijani Shias and Salafists or Wahhabis, Hasanov acknowledged some problems. Hasanov said the Salafi community tends to be very intolerant and negative toward other Islamic confessions. He suggested that the Salafi community's intolerance contributes to negative perceptions of the broader and more tolerant Islamic community in Azerbaijan.

Comment

19. (C) Hasanov is representative of those Azerbaijani Shias who are devout and striving to develop authentic Islamic institutions and voices. Hasanov's contention that Azerbaijani Shias can selectively borrow from Iran at a

theological level is a claim we hear often. Another Muslim believer separately told us that the majority of Azerbaijani Shias who go to Qom are guided by the desire to study at a premier Shia learning center, just as an aspiring American engineer might pursue studies at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology. Hasanov's criticism of the GOAJ's restrictive religious policy is one we also frequently hear from many contacts -- namely that the GOAJ is unable or unwilling to distinguish between radical Muslims and those pious believers who seek to practice their religion.

¶10. (C) There is a gradual growth of Shia and Sunni communities in Baku neighborhoods. Leaders within these communities, however, often only enjoy localized followings, vice a broader city-wide reputation. Several local contacts told us that Hasanov is one of the few Baku-based clerics whose appeal is at the city-wide level, vice a particular neighborhood.

¶11. (C) The Embassy nominated Hasanov for an IVP program, but he was unable to attend because of a family illness. Embassy IVP programs remain a key tool for cultivating and reinforcing a positive image of America among Azerbaijani Muslims. We plan to nominate him for a subsequent program.
DERSE